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ROME'S HEROIC PAST IN THE POEMS OF CLAUDIAN¹

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Virgil nowhere else makes so strong an appeal to patriotism as when he summons up Rome's great past and marshals in his lines the heroes of Roman tradition. Already in the Augustan Age the imaginations of men were deeply stirred by Rome's long history and by the extent of her empire. To the supporters of Augustus a new order had arisen, which in their hopes was to renew the glory of the past. It is not without interest to turn to a period more than four centuries later and to consider the attitude of Romans toward their empire and their past at a moment just before that empire began finally to fall apart under the attacks of the northern invaders.

When in 401 A.D. Alaric first invaded Italy, according to tradition he was impelled by a clear oracle:

Rumpe omnes, Alarice, moras; hoc impiger anno
Alpibus Italiae ruptis penetrabis ad urbem.²

There is abundant evidence that the mere possibility of Rome's capture filled every Roman mind with horror; and we need not doubt that the court poet of the day was justified in representing some of Alaric's barbarian followers as shrinking from the advance on the city as an act of sacrilege. To barbarian as well as citizen Rome stood for law, letters, and culture, for all that made up the highest civilization with which she had encompassed the world. So, even after her capture, Rutilius Namatianus celebrated the city, as he left for Gaul:

Quantum vitalis natura tetendit in axes,
Tantum virtuti pervia terra tuae.
Fecisti patriam diversis gentibus unam:
Profuit invitis te dominante capi.

¹ Read before the Classical Association of New England at Hartford, Conn., April 2, 1910.

² *De bello Gothico* 546 f.

Dumque offers victis proprii consortia iuris,
 Urbem fecisti, quod prius orbis erat.

· · · · ·
 Porrige victuras Romana in saecula leges
 Solaque fatales non vereare colos.¹

Rome had indeed long been the sacred city hallowed by her great past of more than eleven centuries. Today we cannot appreciate what that extent of national history means. The Revolutionary War has for us the dignity of age after a bare century and a third; the Pilgrim Fathers have been ennobled by an antiquity of less than three hundred years. It is evident then that we have no real measure for the antiquity of Rome when viewed from the death of Theodosius in 395 A.D.; the traditional beginnings of that city were farther away from the young emperor Honorius than the coronation of Charles the Great is from us. It is not surprising therefore that in spite of all its vicissitudes Rome exercised a mighty spell on men, seemed indeed to be the very palladium on which the safety of the empire depended. In 410, when after a lapse of eight hundred years Rome was again captured by an invader, both pagans and Christians felt that the disaster was nothing less than a divine punishment. The pagan party saw in the city's fall the terrible result of abandoning the ancient religion; it was to combat this charge that Augustine wrote his *City of God* and Orosius composed his history. It is true that Rome had long ceased to be the heart of the empire; a new Rome on the Bosphorus had divided her honor. Long before under Augustus the power of her legislative assemblies had been lost; the senate's competence had steadily declined until under Diocletian that body became nothing more than a municipal council; and the reduction of the magisterial power had kept pace with the weakening of the senate. From the time of Constantine Rome had seldom had the glory of furnishing the imperial home: indeed Honorius' triumphal visit in 403 gave her almost her only opportunity of seeing a resident emperor for a hundred years. Yet in spite of all this, senatorial rank was still the badge of nobility; and the consulship, misused as it was at times, remained the supreme honor. All pagan and many Christian writers show a reverence and awe for

¹ *De reditu suo* I, 61-66, 133-34.

the ancient capital; they gloried in her noble past, and praised her even in her present state. To Ausonius she was

Prima urbes inter, divum domus, aurea Roma.

Of all the writers of this time none shows a greater appreciation of Rome's history than Claudian. Although an Hellenic Alexandrian who turned to composition in Latin somewhat late, he has expressed the feeling of his age more adequately than any other. He often offends us by his extravagant flattery and by his attempts to give nobility through his polished verse to trifling and petty subjects; but when he deals with the grandeur of Rome he shows the true insight of the poet, is sincere and noble. Like Rutilius he understood the service which that city had been to the nations. So in his earliest panegyric, when Rome, appareled like Minerva, appears to the general Probus to beg the gift of his sons for the consulship, he makes Probus address her:

"O numen amicum,"

Dux ait, "et legum genetrix longeque regendo
Circumfusa polo consors ac dicta Tonantis,
Dic agetum, quae causa viae? cur deseris arces
Ausonias caelumque tuum? dic, maxima rerum!"¹

Again in a lofty passage he recites Rome's glories: beginning with her splendid buildings and situation on the seven hills, he passes on to celebrate her accomplishments. Here also he names her mother of arms and of laws to all peoples:

Armorum legumque parens quae fundit in omnes
Imperium primique dedit cunabula iuris.²

He recounts how from small beginnings she has extended her power to the two poles and made her empire as wide as the course of the sun. She has faced many foes and conquered all: no reverses have ever made her yield; neither Cannae nor Trebia daunted her; she has ever advanced her dominion. Moreover she alone among victors has treated the conquered peoples like a mother and made them peaceful members of one nation:

Haec est in gremium victos quae sola recepit
Humanumque genus communi nomine fovit

¹ *Panegy. dictus Probino et Olybrio coss.* 126-30.

² *De Consul. Stilichonis* 3, 136-37.

Matris, non dominae ritu, civesque vocavit
Quos domuit nexuque pio longinqua revinxit.
Huius pacificis debemus moribus omnes,
Quod veluti patriis regionibus utitur hospes.¹

The passage closes with an assurance of the permanence of the empire which recalls the confidence shown by the Augustan poets.

Nec terminus umquam

Romanae dictionis erit.²

Yet with all his proud expression of belief that Rome is eternal, the poet does not conceal his sense of her dangers. In his poem on the war with Gildo, when Italy was threatened with famine he represents the city, weak and worn, appealing to Jove for assistance; she dwells on her great and victorious past; in her distress she longs for her earlier condition:

Felicior essem

Angustis opibus; mallet tolerare Sabinos
Et Veios; brevior duxi securius aevum.
Ipsa nocet moles. Vtinam remeare liceret
Ad veteres fines et moenia pauperis Anci.
Sufficerent Etrusca mihi Campanaque culta
Et Quincti Curique seges, patriaeque petenti
Rusticus inferret proprias dictator aristas.
Nunc quid agam? Libyam Gildo tenet, altera Nilum.
Ast ego, quae terras umeris pontumque subegi,
Deseror: emeritae iam praemia nulla senectae.
Di, quibus iratis crevi, succurrite tandem
Exorate patrem; tuque o si sponte per altum
Vecta Palatinis mutasti collibus Idam
Praelatoque lavas Phrygios Almone leones,
Maternis precibus natum iam flecte, Cybebe.
Sin prohibent Parcae falsisque elusa vetustas
Auspiciis, alio saltem prosternite casu
Et poenae mutate genus. Porsenna reducat
Tarquinius; renovet ferales Allia pugnās;
Me potius saevi manibus permittite Pyrrhi,
Me Senonum furiis, Brenni me reddite flammis.
Cuncta fame leviora mihi.³

But Claudian most often expresses his sense of Rome's great past by summoning into his pages the heroes of tradition whose

¹ *De consul. Stilichonis* 3, 150-55.

² *Ibid.* 159f.

³ *De bello Gild.* 1, 105-27..

names had for centuries stirred the Roman's pride. Not only the kings, warlike Quirinus and kindly Numa, but Brutus, Camillus, Serranus, the Decii, Curi, Metelli, Scipios and Catos, Cocles, Fabricius, Fabius, Marcellus, Aemilius Paullus, Marius, and Pompey, have their places. It was not in vain that our poet had studied his exempla and dwelt on those splendid lines in the sixth book of the Aeneid, where the shade of Anchises reviews for Aeneas the Roman heroes who are to be. These names furnish Claudian models for comparison and exhortation. At times in his desire to please he falls into low flattery, as when in his panegyric on the consuls of the year 395 he declares:

His ego nec Decios pulchros fortesve Metellos
Praetulerim, non, qui Poenum domuere ferocem,
Scipiadas Gallisque genus fatale Camillos.¹

It is, however, for his great hero Stilicho that he most often seeks a comparison. In the poem on Stilicho's consulship, when he represents the whole world as complaining because Stilicho hesitates to accept, he asks if it be because Eutropius, the base eastern minister, has defiled that high office. Even so, Stilicho will purify the consulship as he preserved it:

Sic trabeis ultor Stilicho Brutusque repertor.
Libertas populi primo tunc consule Bruto
Reddita per fasces; hic fascibus expulit ipsis
Servitium. Instituit sublimem Brutus honorem;
Adseruit Stilicho.²

When Stilicho accepts the office, Rome is made in her joy to call on the great dead to share her satisfaction.

"Nunc," ait, "Elysii lucos inrumpere campi,
Nunc libet, ut tanti Curiis miracula voti
Fabriciisque feram, famae qui vulnere nuper
Calcatam flevire togam: iam prata choreis
Pulsent nec rigidos pudeat luisse Catones.
Audiat hoc senior Brutus Poenisque tremendi
Scipiadae."³

Indeed in another passage Stilicho's rule is represented as so just and mild that even the champions of liberty in the republic would gladly have lived under him:

¹ *Panegyrr. dictus Probrino et Olybriio coss.* 147-49.

² *De consul. Stilichonis* 2, 322-26.

³ *Ibid.* 378-84.

"Quis vero insignem tanto sub principe curam
Respuat?"

.
Nunc Brutus amaret
Vivere sub regno, tali succumberet aulae
Fabricius, cuperent ipsi servire Catones.¹

Furthermore, Claudian measures his hero's prowess in war by the famous deeds of the past; he declares that in the struggle against the Goths Stilicho alone performed deeds equal to those of Fabius, Marcellus, and the third Scipio combined. Again he flatters him in this fashion:

Victoria nulla
Clarior aut hominum votis optatior umquam
Contigit. An quisquam Tigranen armaque Ponti
Vel Pyrrhum Antiochique fugam vel vincla Iugurthae
Conferat aut Persen debellatumque Philippum?

.
Quis Punica gesta,
Quis vos, Scipiadae, quis te iam, Regule, nosset,
Quis lentum caneret Fabium, si iure perempto
Insultaret atrox famula Carthagine Maurus?
Haec omnis veterum revocavit adorea laurus.
Restituit Stilicho cunctos tibi, Roma, triumphos.²

And once more in another passage too long for quotation, Claudian declares that all the deeds of Curius, Decius, Fabricius, Scipio, Marcellus, Aemilius Paullus, and Marius combined were not equal to Stilicho's accomplishments.

Claudian, however, did not use his examples from antiquity solely for the purpose of securing comparisons favorable to Stilicho. He drew from them exhortations as well, as when he urged him to rise and crush the greedy ex-slave Eutropius, reminding him that it was the war with the pirates which exalted the great Pompey, and his victory over the slaves which made Crassus famous. A like inspiration was to be found in the words Claudian wished future ages to read on the battlefield of Pollentia:

Hic Cimbros fortesque Getas, Stilichone peremptos
Et Mario claris ducibus, tegit Itala tellus.
Discite vesanae Romam non temnere gentes.³

¹ *Panegy. dictus Manlio Theodoro coss.* 159 f., 163-65.

² *De consul. Stilichonis* 1, 368-72; 380-85.

³ *De bello Goth.* 645-17.

If the servile extravagance of many of these comparisons is such that it tends to keep us from appreciating the significance of our poet's appeal to the ancient glories of Rome, we must constantly remember that no more cogent appeal could be made to Roman pride than by marshaling the names of the great dead. Still it is a relief to turn to another passage, addressed to the young **Honorius** on the occasion of his fourth consulship, in which the great **Theodosius** is represented as instructing his son.

Interea Musis animus, dum mollior, instet
 Et quae mox imitere legat; nec desinat umquam
 Tecum Graia loqui, tecum Romana vetustas.
 Antiquos evolve duces, adsuesce futurae
 Militiae, Latium retro te confer in aevum.
 Libertas quaesita placet? mirabere Brutum.
 Perfidiam damnas? Metti satiabere poenis.
 Triste rigor nimius? Torquati despice mores.
 Mors impensa bonum? Decios venerare ruentes.
 Vel solus quid fortis agat, te ponte soluto
 Oppositus Cocles, Muci te flamma docebit;
 Quid mora perfringat, Fabius; quid rebus in artis
 Dux gerat, ostendet Gallorum strage Camillus.
 Discitur hinc nullos meritis obsistere casus:
 Prorogat aeternam feritas tibi Punica famam,
 Regule; successus superant adversa Catonis.
 Discitur hinc quantum paupertas sobria possit:
 Pauper erat Curius, reges cum vinceret armis,
 Pauper Fabricius, Pyrrhi cum sperneret aurum;
 Sordida dictator flexit Serranus aratra:¹

In such verses we hear the national pride ring true, and can sympathize.

While the heroes of Rome are thus honored, her great enemies also have their place; **Pyrrhus**, **Hannibal**, **Philip**, **Antiochus**, **Spartacus**, **Tigranes**, and **Mithradates** are all mentioned; **Sulla** is given no more honorable position than the traitor **Mettius**.

It will be seen that almost all those whom **Claudian** celebrated belonged to the period before the close of the Punic Wars. The fall of Carthage for later generations marked the end of Rome's heroic age. After that Roman life and action fell to mortal plane,

¹ *De quarto consul. Honorii* 396-415.

and only a few like Pompey and Cato were canonized. It is interesting therefore now to inquire what the attitude of Claudian was toward the rulers of the empire, which, as he says, "had been acquired and preserved by so much blood, which the efforts of a thousand leaders had gained, whose fabric Roman hands had wrought through so many centuries."¹ The passages from which I have already quoted show how great a thing the Roman world was to him even in the age of her weakness. Himself an imperial subject, we should expect that he would give praise to the emperors who had established the empire, but such is not the case. Julius Caesar is mentioned as having gathered insolently all law into his own hands, an act which marked the beginning of Rome's decline;² Augustus is remembered for the blood he shed in civil strife, bringing sorrow to his native land while he falsely claimed the credit of piety.³ On the other hand Nerva, Trajan, Antoninus Pius, the gentle Marcus Aurelius, and the *bellatores Severi* are named in honor.

As I have suggested already, Claudian saw signs of ill omen for the future: the bonds of empire were weakening, the Goths were within the borders; a rival capital on the Bosphorus threatened the empire's ancient center; a new religion had already won its way against the elder gods. Thus conditioned he found in Rome's heroic past something more than the means to adorn a courtier's verse; like many another of his day he gained comfort from the memory of Rome's antiquity and felt satisfaction in her present power. Even in the threatening time in which he lived he was always conscious that it was Rome which had welded the nations into one people and held dominion over them. With pride he could say that Virgil's charge to Rome had been obeyed. Not only had she ruled the peoples by her sway, spared the conquered, crushed the proud, but she had bound those peoples into one nation under law, had made the civilized world one fatherland for all. She had been indeed—

armorum legumque parens.

¹ *In Rufinum* 2, 50-52.

² *De bello Gild.* 1, 49 ff.

³ *De sexto cons. Honorii* 116-18.